

The Final Word – Heart of Midlothian v Hibernian 09.04.22

So, what should we talk about? Petrol prices? Will Smith and Chris Rock recreating peak-1994 Levein and Hogg? Or the Edinburgh Derby?

Derbies. A single-Derby is enough to occupy the mind and fill back-pages but consecutive Derbies when one is a Scottish Cup Semi-Final? And perhaps a third in quick succession before the season-end? This is the sort of series Americans call a World Championship.

As I wrote in the Livingston programme Edinburgh football has almost always boiled down to Heart of Midlothian versus Hibernian. Since the first meeting – and Hearts' win - on the Meadows on Christmas Day 1875 there have been many titanic clashes across the decades. And yes, the odd awful one too. Yet no matter how often the two meet there remains a buzz countered only by nerves.

Of course, it's hard not to look ahead to the Semi-Final next week but this is still a very important League game for both sides with Hearts seeking to cement third-place and European football and Hibs looking to win a top-six spot. But the Cup match looms ever closer. Yet if someone wins today, they will immediately downplay its' significance as much as any loser will seek to write it off. Regardless, it's a fascinating but unpredictable prospect.

Having started watching Hearts in the early eighties my arrival on the scene coincided with a revival of fortune for us in this fixture. Despite not actually being born at the time it wouldn't be the first Hibs fan that has attempted to score points [insert own punchline there] by bringing up a certain New Year score-line. Actually, I was at High School before I saw Hibs win a Derby and sportingly, they waited until I made University before they won another one – at the 23rd attempt. So, there's been plenty for us to enjoy down the years and we can all testify how good a feeling it is to win a Derby.

We all have our heroes. From John Robertson seemingly striking in every one through to the likes of Mark de Vries, Kevin Kyle and Aaron Hickey. To score the winner in a Derby ensures a special place in history and hence alongside those names we can remember the generally, less-celebrated Husref Musemic, David Obua and Oliver Bozanic. And of course, the Festival Cup.

Regardless of how or who, a Derby win is surely like no other and with the stakes high there is a huge opportunity for another hero to step forward.

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Although there has been a constant supply of League Derbies, Cup versions were much rarer for a number of years. We had Fozzy-on-the-fence in 1994 but then had to wait until the Semi-Final of 2006 for a

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repeat. However, with 11 Cup games since they seem to have become a regular fixture. One thing for certain is that Hearts have enjoyed the better of the clashes at Hampden. The first meeting in 2006 was something of a novelty; for the two hadn't overly troubled the roads to Hampden never mind clogging them together. Both sides were particularly strong at the time but in the end, it was Hearts who stepped up - and Paul Hartley in particular with a hat-trick - in the 4-0 win. After the tension of the build-up to win so conclusively was both surprising and very, very enjoyable (it certainly proved more clear-cut than the Final versus Gretna). Indeed, I recall relaying the score and details to a mate who was on holiday in Bangkok at the time. Stuck in Glasgow traffic beneath a bridge I was texting away thinking, "I don't want to make him *too* jealous..." I have, however, actively suggested he might like to fly out before next week.

Six years later it's fair to say both sides exceeded expectations in reaching the Final but if the build up to a Semi-Final was tense then this was off the scale. Every conversation began with the Final. I was helping run buses for Hearts at the time and it was a wonderful sight to see a convoy of 20 coaches drift into Gorgie Road and head west. The game and result speak for themselves although an overriding memory is the comparative shock that we had won the Cup with 30 minutes left. I think that also affected the players and hence it was indeed only five. Afterwards, our convoy very happily set-off to return to Gorgie only to be pulled over just outside Glasgow. As the Police outriders passed by it became apparent that they were escorting the Hibs team coach. It has to be said most of our bus took advantage to 'pass on their commiserations' but I was genuinely struck by just how devastated and broken those Hibs players looked.

Lockdown brought a totally different experience in the 2020 Semi-Final of course. A wet, empty Hampden barely befitted the tie but did herald an against-the-odds victory for Hearts. That said, I have to be honest that the abiding memory was the news during the game that Marius Zaliukas had passed away. Joining in the aftermath of the 2006 Cup win he was of course skipper in 2012 and somewhere up there he continued to provide inspiration eight years later. Derby heroes are made for life and beyond.

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Recent results have continued emerging trends. A decent point at Dingwall meant that six out of the last seven fixtures between the two have been drawn. More concerningly we also continued our apparent Corinthian refusal to convert penalties. However, the point maintained our 14-point lead in third-place and made it just one defeat in eight as we seek to (further) leave behind a patchy February.

Equally, they say that 2-0 can be a funny lead but the win over Livingston was our fifth such win of 2022. It's credit to our game management that we've looked comfortable in each and in the Livi' game just as

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they emerged to try and find an equaliser we were clinical enough to go up the other end and pretty much win the game with our second goal. And what a goal!

A much less welcome ‘trend’ has been the high number of injuries we’ve recently suffered. Having been relatively fortunate this season – especially compared to previous, torturous campaigns – we now have a number of key players sidelined. Of course, the draw at Tannadice saw us lose five players in one go but in addition to that we already had Michael Smith out medium-term and sadly now Beni Baningime out for a number of months.

However, whilst we have a smaller squad it does have both flexibility and quality and hopefully can see us through to a successful end to the season. That quality was reflected in the last week with Craig Gordon continuing to excel for Scotland – and Hearts! – and Nathaniel Atkinson debuting for Australia.

Should we, indeed, end up in European football next season then we will need that in greater quantities but given our successful recent recruitment and emerging Academy players there is good reason to be optimistic for the challenges ahead.

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Another unique feature of this fixture is that today’s kicks-off at 3pm. I’m told this is the first Saturday 3pm kick-off for almost 16 years and having had almost every time since then apart from that it’s quite refreshing to have the Derby to ourselves. That said, it’s back to normal next week with a 12.15 start in a city 47 miles from home. See you for the queuing at Central!

In natural order of course.